

**LESSON 5B—NARRATIVE:  
BESIDES TIPIS, WHAT OTHER  
TYPES OF SHELTERS DID  
ANCIENT PEOPLE USE?**

*Besides tipis, ancient people also used caves, rockshelters, pithouses, wickiups, and cribbed log structures as shelters.*

Prehistoric people relied on forms of shelter other than the tipi. Geological formations offered natural shelters in the form of **caves** and **rockshelters**. Ancient people had used these forms of shelter since the close of the Ice Age some twelve thousand years ago. The best locations were along cliff faces near water sources. Daily life took place at the front of a cave or rockshelter where there was warmth and light. The people used the back of a cave or rockshelter to store supplies and equipment. During colder months, they may have placed animal hides and brush at the front of the cave or rockshelter to keep out wind and cold. Family groups used these natural shelters repeatedly, as did hunting parties traveling through the region.

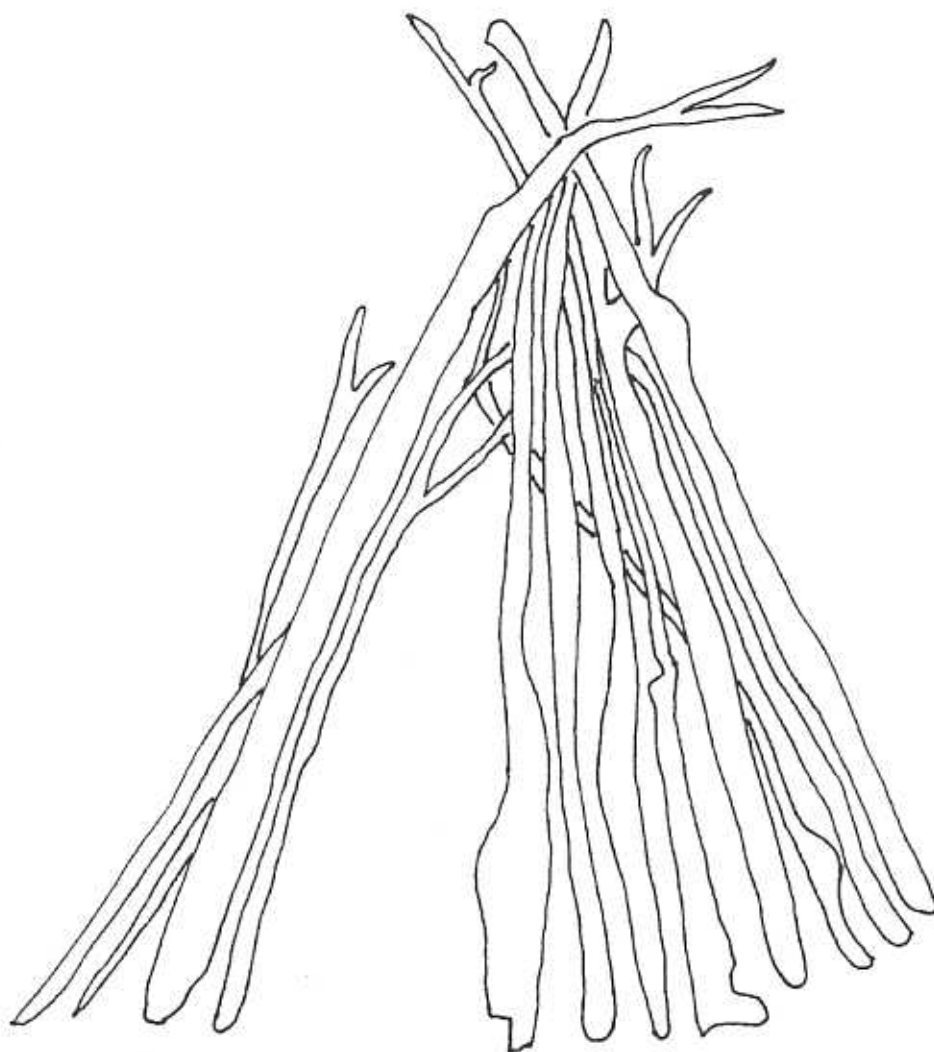
In many caves and rockshelters, people left behind artifacts they no longer used. The artifacts left by one prehistoric group would be covered with wind-blown soil, and then another group would occupy the cave or rockshelter. Over time, layers of artifacts and soil built up inside the shelters. These **stratigraphic layers** are a record of prehistoric use of caves and rockshelters over time. Caves and rockshelters also sometimes preserve fragile, **perishable** artifacts of hide and vegetal material. These artifacts usually decay quickly in open campsites, and so caves and rockshelters, where organic materials are more

protected from the elements, are very important to archaeologists. A good example is the Pictograph Cave site near Billings. Unfortunately, many of these sites have been **looted** by artifact collectors who know the value of artifacts found in these sites.

Another type of ancient shelter was a **pithouse**. A pithouse was made by digging a wide, shallow hole—a pit—in the ground. The builders then placed log posts around the hole to support a roof. The walls and roof were made of dirt, brush, or animal hides. Because of the pit, part of the house was underground. These pithouses were smoky, dark, and drafty, but an internal hearth fire provided warmth, helping prehistoric people survive the long winter season. For quite some time, archaeologists believed that there were only recent pithouses in Montana. New discoveries indicate ancient Montanans used pithouses around four thousand years ago, particularly in southeastern Montana. Pithouse sites are still very rare, indicating that few prehistoric Indian groups in Montana used this type of structure. But more pithouses may be discovered in the future, and this could change archaeologists' theories on how much pithouses were used.

Archaeologists know that prehistoric groups used wood and brush in their dwellings. **Wickiup** is the name given to one type of shelter created with these raw materials. A wickiup was made of timbers stacked together

Wickiups resembled tipis, but they were probably not covered with hides. *Courtesy Montana Historical Society.*



in a cone shape. Prehistoric people then placed shorter sticks, pine boughs, and brush over and between the timbers as the covering. Sometimes they stacked rocks around the base. A wickiup looks much like a tipi without the hide covering. Some archaeologists call wickiups "conical timbered lodges."

Wickiup structures are fragile and do not survive for very long. None of the wickiups surviving today are more than three hundred years old. Some archaeologists believe that these shelters are a recent innovation developed during historic times. Others argue

that wickiups were used by prehistoric people, but that, being made of wood, they simply decayed and disappeared. Many wickiups found today are well concealed in remote, dense stands of timber. They may have been built by war parties as protection against musket balls and rifle bullets in historic times. Hunting parties may have used other wickiups. Wickiups containing household artifacts indicate that some were used more permanently as family shelters, probably during the winter months. Most wickiups are found in southwestern and south-central Montana. Many were probably made

by Shoshone groups who inhabited this region at the end of the Late Prehistoric Period and in early historic times. A good example of a wickiup is in Wickiup Cave near Lima, Montana. Other preserved wickiups were made by the Blackfeet, Crow, and other groups. Lewis and Clark describe seeing unoccupied wickiups along the Missouri River during their explorations in 1805–1806.

Ancient shelters similar to wickiups are **cribbed log structures**. These were lodges made of logs and poles laid horizontally and stacked three or four feet high. They are most often **pentagonal**, having five sides. They resemble the modern Navajo hogans found in Arizona. Their builders used sticks, brush, and sandstone slabs to fill the space between logs and around the base. How their roofs were constructed is unknown. Poles may have been placed across the cribbed log walls, with brush or animal hides placed on top as the roof. Because few artifacts have been discovered in cribbed log structures, archaeologists believe that they were used as short-term dwellings. When lots of artifacts and maybe a fire hearth are found in a structure, these indicate longer use, most likely during the cold seasons of the year. Cribbed log structures are found mostly in the

Yellowstone River area of south-central Montana. One example is Coyote House, which is located on a prominent sandstone bluff on the Custer National Forest.

Archaeologists have also found a variety of **lean-to's** and possible shelters made of partially stacked stones and sticks. Some of these were probably temporary shelters used by people caught in bad weather, and some were probably built by hunters and war parties. Today, these very impermanent prehistoric shelters are easy to confuse with shelters built by fur trappers, sheepherders, and modern-day hikers and campers. The presence of a stone tool or the absence of historic or modern trash may be the best indicators that a shelter is ancient.



Some prehistoric structures that look like shelters were probably used for other purposes. This small, U-shaped stack of rocks is thought to be a vision quest structure. *Tim Urbanjak, photographer.*

**LESSON 5B—VOCABULARY: BESIDES TIPIS, WHAT OTHER TYPES OF SHELTERS DID ANCIENT PEOPLE USE?**

caves \_\_\_\_\_

cribbed log structure \_\_\_\_\_

lean-to \_\_\_\_\_

pentagonal \_\_\_\_\_

perishable \_\_\_\_\_

pithouse \_\_\_\_\_

rockshelters \_\_\_\_\_

stratigraphic layers \_\_\_\_\_

wickiup \_\_\_\_\_

## LESSON 5B—ARCH ACTIVITY: CONSTRUCT A CAVE

**Grades:** 3–8

**Time:** 2 sessions, 60 minutes+ each

**Content Area:** arts

**Who:** small group

**Materials (per group):**

fine chicken wire (3' x 4')

newspaper

paints and brushes

flour-and-water paste

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### OBJECTIVE AND OUTCOME

- Students will gain understanding of an early shelter, the cave.
- Students will create a papier maché cave wall.

### ACTIVITY

1. Determine the group size. Each group will build a section of a cave. Tear strips of newspaper for papier-maché.

2. Shape the chicken wire to resemble a cave wall. Turn bottom edge under and in, about 1 foot. Work the wire to create a slightly uneven surface.

3. Place the wall on several layers of newspaper, extended some distance out. Mix the flour and water paste to a medium consistency. Cover the wire with two layers of papier-maché on each side. Leave to dry.

4. When dry, paint the surface gray, mixed with some earth-tone rock colors. Cave sides may be placed side by side to form a larger enclosure.

Alternative (3–4): Use large sheets of paper. Spray with different shades of dark paint. Crumple sheets and staple them to wall to give wall texture. Use chalk to draw pictographs.

### EXTENSIONS

3–6:

- Research vocabulary.

See: Lesson 5B—Vocabulary

- Add pictographs to the cave walls.
- Create a camp scene to go along with the cave wall.

4–8:

- Have students create dioramas/models of a prehistoric settlement.